

## Fish Petroglyphs at 'Ava 'o Kiri, Rapa Nui An Approximation of a Remarkable Rock Art Site at Easter Island

Maarten van Hoek

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most isolated islands in the world is Rapa Nui in the south Pacific. It is famous for its gigantic *moai* (statues) and for that reason it attracts many visitors each year. These statues, however, are not the only archaeological treasures. The island also boasts numerous caves, stone structures, and artifacts. Above all, there are thousands of rock carvings (petroglyphs) plus some rock paintings. Most people, however, are unaware of the existence of the petroglyphic wealth on this small island. Only occasionally are they noticed when in good condition and conveniently close to the megalithic remains on the island, such as the "birdman" at 'Orongo or the turtles at Tongariki on the south coast.

On the north coast many visitors are attracted to the ro-

is a small but inconspicuous eminence of rough lava that is part of a larger area called 'Ava 'o Kiri (Figure 1). Yet, here we find three most interesting rock art panels that will be the subject of this article that, for the typical background information on Rapa Nui, is based on the work of Georgia Lee (1992), as will be evidenced by the number of references.

### THE PETROGLYPHS OF 'AVA 'O KIRI

'Ava 'o Kiri is one of the many rock art sites on Rapa Nui and is found like the great majority of the archaeological sites in close proximity of the coast, confirming the profound relation of the islanders with the ocean. This important connection is not only enhanced by the geographical positioning of the engravings along the coast, but also by the many sea creatures and objects concerned with sea life that are depicted on outcrop rock and *paenga* (shaped stones). Thus we find many boat-shaped petroglyphs, fishhooks, sea turtles, octopi and several types of fish depicted on the rocks. According to the survey by Lee (1992) there are more than 250 sea creatures and over 630

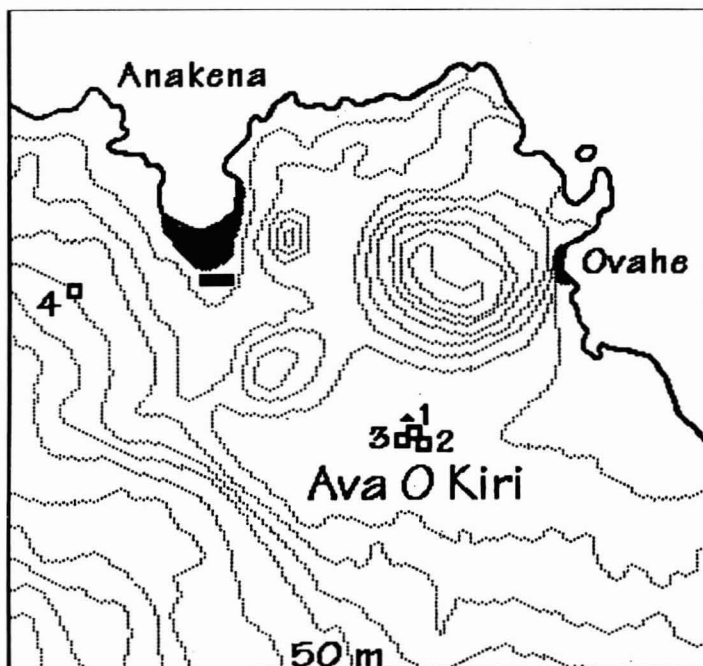


Figure 1. Location maps of the 'Ava 'o Kiri site on Rapa Nui. Only names mentioned in the text are shown (from Lee 1992 Figure 1.1).

mantic 'Anakena beach and its *moai*, and although some people notice the beautiful back decorations on the statues and perhaps some of the decorated stones in the platform, they are unaware that the whole area is littered with rock art. Many rock art panels are hidden in the tall grass, covered with lichen and, moreover, are often weathered.

One of these rock art sites is located near the junction of the roads leading to 'Anakena and Ovahe and, although it is so close to the only main road on the island, it is rarely noticed. It

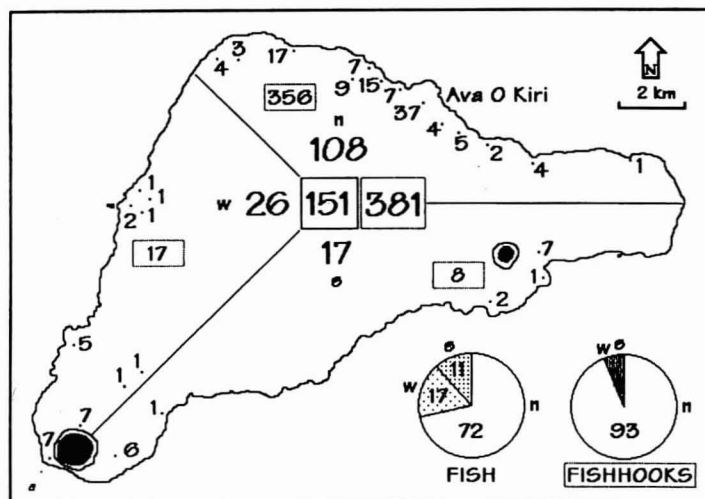


Figure 2. The distribution and numbers of fish and fishhook petroglyphs across Rapa Nui. The relative occurrence of both types is shown in the diagrams. The division is arbitrary and not based on clan divisions (from Lee 1992 Figures 4.51 and 4.115).

boat and fishhook glyphs, proving that at least roughly one quarter of the motifs are directly sea-related.

The wealth of fish petroglyphs on Rapa Nui, with 180 km<sup>2</sup>, becomes most apparent when compared with, for instance, Britain, with 228240 km<sup>2</sup> or 1250 times larger than Rapa Nui. If Britain had the same concentration of fish petroglyphs as Rapa Nui, it would have about 180,000 examples. However, Britain has not a single fish petroglyph on outcrop rock.



Figure 3. a) the hill to the north of the petroglyph site; b) a closeup of the petroglyphs (photo by M. van Hoek).

Also the extremely rich Bronze Age rock art corpus of Bohuslän, Southwest Sweden, which, like Rapa Nui art, is also strongly sea-related, completely lacks depictions of fish (Coles 1990:35; but see page 73 where Mesolithic paintings of a fish-hook and a whale (fish ?) are reported), whereas fish most certainly were one of the major food resources for the peoples living in this irregular coastal area.

Surprisingly, several types of petroglyphs are unevenly distributed across Rapa Nui (Lee 1992:5, 45 and 74) and it may be significant that the great majority of the sea-related petroglyphs are located on the north coast. This distribution suggests that the Miru, the dominant clan associated with the founding ancestor, may have controlled the entire north coast (Lee 1992: 206). Such an uneven distribution is also noted for the fish petroglyphs in particular and again the great majority is found on the north coast (Figure 2) with a remarkable concentration in the 'Ava 'o Kiri area, where more than 37 fish motifs have been

recorded at several locations (Lee 1992: Fig. 4.51).

One of these loci is the slight rise east of the road to 'Anakena that we call 'Ava 'o Kiri. Rising only a few metres



Figure 4. The big rock with polissoir and cupules at 'Ava 'o Kiri, looking NW (photo by M. van Hoek).

above the low plain that is just east of a water-worn ravine by the same name, it certainly forms no distinct landmark. Contrary, the flat topped hill to the north of the site is a true landmark, seen from many miles around (Figure 3).

The centre of the impediment is formed by higher and irregular outcrops of lava, featuring odd and rough formations. Surrounding the central part are flatter outcrops on lower levels, a number of which feature a strange collection of petroglyphs. Because of the often irregular and rough character of the lava it is hard to distinguish man-made petroglyphs from natural features. This mainly accounts for the depressions, some of which are definitely man-made cupules and polissoir (tool sharpening depressions), while others may be natural.

There are four decorated panels that deserve special attention, the other panels having only minor, often indeterminable markings. On the north edge of the rise is a large flat lava flow (called *papa* in the local language) which is literally covered with more than 30 polissoir and a few cupules (Figure 4). The combination of polissoir and true petroglyphs is not uncommon at Rapa Nui and occurs, for instance, also at Papa Vaka (Lee 1992:108, 178 and 179) and Ahu Mahatua (Lee 1992:62) both situated on the north coast. In these instances, however, the polissoir appear on the same panel as the petroglyphs, whereas at 'Ava 'o Kiri there is a distinct separation between the polissoir panel and the petroglyph panels. It is even impossible to see the polissoir from the other panels. There may be a reason for this.



Figure 5. The petroglyphs of Panel I at 'Ava 'o Kiri. The arrow indicates the slope of the panel (drawing by M. van Hoek).

At 'Ava 'o Kiri there are only three other major panels with six petroglyphs, and this small number does not justify the presence of so many polissoir. Therefore, I suggest that this site was specially visited by the islanders for sharpening their tools, possibly because of the importance of the site and its fish motifs. Perhaps it was thought that supernatural potency (*mana*) could be derived from the rock by sharpening their tools at this specific spot. Therefore, the polissoir sites need not be contemporary with the petroglyphs.

On the north and east sides of the rise, close to or touching the highest parts and on slightly higher level than the polissoir panel, are three smooth *papa* with petroglyphs of marine creatures, numbered 1, 2 and 3 in Figure 1.

Panel 1, slightly sloping towards the observer, shows a most distinctly carved fish, oriented (swimming) east-west, said to represent a tuna with bone structure indicated (Lee 1992:76). It is, however, not certain whether internal lines indeed represent bones; they equally could indicate an (imaginary) pattern on the skin. Examples of petroglyphs of tuna at, for instance,



Figure 6. The "fish in fish" petroglyph at 'Ava 'o Kiri Panel 2, looking east. The maximum width of the outer fish is about 75 cm (photo by M. van Hoek).

Tongariki (Lee 1992: Figs. 4.65, 6.20) and Papa Vaka (ibid.: Fig. 4.59) show only longitudinal lines. Also, the internal lines of Panel 1 have not been laid out consistently according to real bone structure. This became even more evident as, at the time of our visit, more internal lines could be seen as well as a second fishhook nearer the tail plus a doubtful zigzag line south of the tail (Figure 5). This tail is relatively more deeply carved and it

may be significant in that it is separated from the body by a distinct natural crack, whereas the head (and especially the eye) is

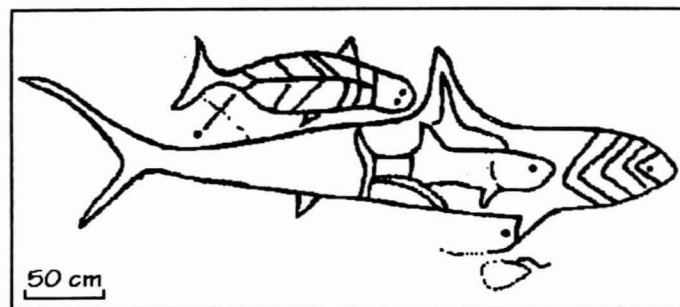


Figure 7. A shark with an interior fish on a rock art panel in the same area as 'Ava 'o Kiri (from Lee 1992 Figure 4.58).

very faintly executed in a slight natural depression and even seems to be unfinished.

Panel 2 is a large and extremely smooth *papa* a couple of metres to the south-east of Panel 1. It is oval-shaped and is partly "isolated" from its surroundings by a low rim of upstanding lava, a typical feature of some Rapa Nui *papa*. The same feature can, for instance, also be seen at the "Dos Caras" petroglyph just west of 'Anakena (Figure 1-4), where a third petroglyph (of a fish?) has been carved on a flat part of the rim. Such a feature may have been one of the reasons for selecting these panels for petroglyphs. Panel 2 is dominated by a large outline engraving of a fish, also oriented east-west, with no recognizable details other than a distinct tail and one or two fins.

What makes this engraving most interesting, however, is



Figure 8. Panel 3 at 'Ava 'o Kiri, looking east. The length of the petroglyph is about 90 cm (photo by M. van Hoek).

that it has an interior design that also depicts another, smaller, sea creature, possibly a fish, similarly oriented. This second "fish" only showed up when the setting sun cast a slanting light, thus making it visible and recognizable by its tail (Figure 6). The placement of its tail proves that the interior engraving does not represent either a "double-outline" figure like the third petroglyph on the "Dos Caras" panel or the fish at Te Pahu (Lee 1995: Fig. 69) nor a superimposition like at Vai Tara Kai Ua (Lee 1992: Figure 4.100). According to Lee (1992:78) such a



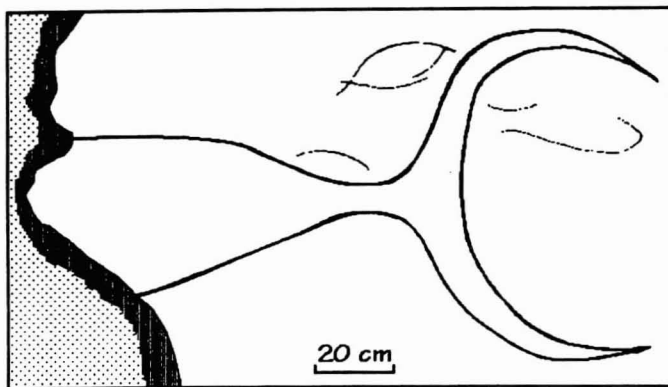


Figure 9. Tail-of-tuna petroglyph at Pu Hakanini Mako'i. The design is not broken off but was deliberately carved in this manner (from Lee 1992 Figure 4.57).

fish-in-fish motif was unique on Rapa Nui as it was reported to occur only once, at another locus also in the 'Ava 'o Kiri area (Figure 7). This second example prompts a careful re-examination of fish petroglyphs on the island.

The third engraved panel lies just to the southwest of Panel 1, but is out of sight from Panel 2, which may be significant. The rock is rougher, but on its smoother northern part is the simple outlined figure of what appears to be the tail of some sea creature, although the tail does not resemble the "classic" tuna tail. This design, oriented north-south, ends in a shallow natural channel in the rock (Figure 8); it is not broken off. Although rare on the island, this type of incomplete design is also found at Pu Hakanini Mako'i on the west coast (Figure 9) and possibly also at Hanga Oteo (Lee 1992:78). We already noticed that the tail of the tuna at Panel 1 has a similar position near a natural crack. It is just possible that the design on Panel 1 started off as a tail-of-tuna motif, and was completed later. This may explain why the execution of the head received less attention.

#### INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Interpretation of rock art is notoriously difficult, especially when there is no written or oral account available, which is often the case. Although the rock art traditions on Rapa Nui are relatively young, much information has been lost during the last much-troubled centuries (Lee 1992:14, 74). Fortunately, however, several myths and legends survived and some petroglyphs on Rapa Nui, often depicting (fabulous) marine creatures, are associated with such myths and legends, especially those that are said to represent spirits "...the highlight of the stories being a magical ability to fly or swim away from this lonely and confining island" (ibid.:74, 205-6). It is therefore almost certain, that "...the islanders were not simply carving motifs of food resources or practical matters" [but that the petroglyphs] "...are related to the spiritual and/or ritual concerns of the society" (ibid.:45). Only in one case, again in the 'Ava 'o Kiri area, there is a rock art panel suggesting that actual fishing was involved (ibid.:110).

To obtain further information, it is also possible to place Rapa Nui art in a broader cultural perspective as it is part of the

East Polynesian culture (Lee 1992:3, 203) which was introduced to the island around 300-400 AD and apparently remained uninfluenced by other cultures until its discovery by Roggeveen in 1722 AD.

In this respect Lee tentatively suggests (1992:74) that petroglyphs of fish may refer to human sacrifice, as human victims were regarded as "fish for the gods" throughout Polynesia. Unfortunately it is not known to me whether myths or legends are associated with this specific site at 'Ava 'o Kiri, but it certainly is situated in an area full of legends, especially around nearby 'Anakena, where the first Rapa Nui king, Hotu Matu'a, is said to have landed. Later the area became the focus of the dominant Miru clan (Lee 1992:167).

In view of the wealth of the many different petroglyphs on Rapa Nui, the range of designs at 'Ava 'o Kiri proves to be rather limited. Apart from some cupules, the remarkably high number of polissoir and a few faint indeterminable marks on some other outcrops (two sets very close to the road to 'Anakena), only "fish" and fishhooks occur.

It is important to realize that Rapanui people were aware of a great number of fish species and more than ten identifiable species have been recognized at many different rock art sites (Lee 1992:37-39). Yet they often chose to engrave only one type on one panel. This is also seen at 'Ava 'o Kiri, which indicates that differential decision-making processes were at work. This may be explained by the fact that in many primitive cultures certain species of fish were considered particularly potent. The selection of mainly "fish" at 'Ava 'o Kiri may indicate that these animals in particular were considered suitable subjects to depict on account of their social and religious importance at this specific geographical locus.

It is moreover surprising to notice the variation in the layout of the "fish"-motif in such a small area. From east to west we find a fish-in-fish design, a complete fish with interior decoration and two fishhooks, and an incomplete "fish". The questions are whether the incomplete design on Panel 3 is deliberate or not and whether the three panels are interrelated.

On Rapa Nui both the fish-in-fish design and the tail-of-tuna motif are extremely rare and their combination with a complete fish on one spot is therefore unique on the island. This makes it highly probable that the three petroglyphs are connected and, when surveying the site, I was struck by a possible sequence of the three designs; possibly the three panels together depict the cycle of life.

To the east, where the sun is "born", there is the fish-in-fish motif that may be interpreted as a "pregnant" sea animal representing the beginning of life, although a fish eaten by a larger fish is also a possible interpretation. In the middle, on the northerly panel, there is the complete tuna plus fishhooks, possibly referring to the catching (fishhooks) of food resources (tuna) from the nearby ocean, visible to the northeast. To the west, where the sun sets (moving to the left for the observer, instead to the right as on the northern hemisphere), we find a sea creature that seems to vanish into solid rock, as if it passes to the supernatural world. Earlier we noticed the Polynesian custom to regard fish as offerings for the gods and thus petroglyphs of fish may equally be associated with death, especially

when depicted incompletely.

In this respect Lee makes some important remarks: "Those who carved sacred designs were under constraints because accuracy dominated religious ethics", and therefore "a slip during carving was taken as a sign of 'psychic blindness'.... and an omen of trouble. Such a carving would be... abandoned" (1992:12). It is therefore highly unlikely that the design at 'Ava 'o Kiri Panel 3 and the example at Pu Hakanini Mako'i represent failures. They most probably were intended this way as the creator of the motif surely was aware of the lack of space and other natural limitations of the rock face, *before* he started the design.

The practice of deliberately depicting incomplete animals or humans, especially when associated with natural rock features or other rock art motifs, is found in many parts of the world. In Galicia, Spain, a number of incomplete stags seem to be emerging from or entering cup-and-ring petroglyphs (Van Hoek 1998:54). In Scandinavia, anthropomorphic figures often were deliberately drawn with only the upper or lower part of the body (Evers 1996:62), or appear to be associated with cup-and-ring petroglyphs (Van Hoek 1998:54). An incomplete snake emerging from a natural hole in the rock face has been reported from the Clocolan District, Southern Africa (Ouzman 1997:96; and Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1990:5) mention several other examples in the same country.

The possible reason behind all these instances has been well formulated by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1990; see

has, for instance, been recorded in northern Australia where cupules are said to represent the traces of Djibigung, the Dreaming Quail (Taçon et al. 1997:961) and for the corpus of Bohuslän rock art in Sweden. Coles (1990:45) notes that "the carvings also had a darker vision, into death and the afterworld, as well as carrying the hope for fertility, rebirth of the land through productivity, and the generation of wealth from the sea".

In general it proves that rock art is not only an account of the literal travels and practices of people, but also may represent a religious and social metaphor for accessing the supernatural world. Possibly also at Rapa Nui, specific animals, important in their culture, were selected because only these (fabulous) animals were considered to be able to enter or leave the supernatural world, or as Lee argues (1992:206), to leave the island.

At Ahu Nau Nau at 'Anakena, just north of 'Ava 'o Kiri (Figure 1), there is a *paenga* built into the back of Ahu Nau Nau that features the upper part of a human figure engraved with such an artistry that it almost literally seems to crawl out of the stone (Figure 10). The concept of the supernatural world to exist 'behind' the rock face may therefore have been part of the religious world at Rapa Nui as well and this concept may also have been the reason for the strange combination of sea creatures at 'Ava 'o Kiri.

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*Scandinavian Society for Prehistoric Art  
Laurier 20, 5061 WS Oisterwijk, Holland*

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Figure 10. *Paenga* built into the west end of Ahu Nau Nau with the skillfully carved half body of a human "crawling out of the stone." Maximum width between the hands is about 75 cm (photo by M. van Hoek).

also Ouzman 1997) who state that many primitive peoples regard the rock surface as a 'veil' suspended between everyday and spirit worlds. The use of natural rock features and/or petroglyphs as entrances through this "veil" for spirits and deities may have been common in many primal societies. This belief